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Selling Out: Musicians, Autonomy, and Compromise in the Digital Age

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Abstract

Charges of "selling out" and debates about the boundaries of cultural autonomy have played a pivotal role in the development of popular music as a legitimate and "serious" art form. With promotional strategies and commercial business practices now practically inseparable from the core activities previously associated with music making, the relevance of such concepts and the values that underpin them are questioned by industry experts, musicians, and fans. In this article, we explore how popular music making and perspectives on selling out have been shaped by digitalization, promotionalism, and globalization.

Keywords
Music industries; commercialism; digitalization; selling out; art vs commerce; autonomy

Introduction

Artists of all kinds have long been faced with the challenge of balancing commercial imperatives with artistic integrity. For fine artists as for filmmakers, for novelists as for fashion designers, crossing a line can risk accusations of "selling out," understood as abandoning "previously held political and aesthetic commitments for financial gain" (Hesmondhalgh 36); alienation of a loyal core of supporters for a flash of mainstream success; and loss of affiliation with groups for whom such boundary maintenance is valued. Despite increasing commercialization and corporatization across the cultural industries, and the recognition that cultural products operate within a commodity system—calling into question assumptions on which the art-commerce opposition relies—scholars have continued to explore the reality and relevance of autonomy to cultural production (Banet-Weiser and Sturken; Banks; Hesmondhalgh; Hibbett; Klein; Powers). This article builds on such work by focusing on popular music as an area of cultural production that is both highly commercialized and corporate-driven but nevertheless has an enduring relationship with discourses of selling out and principles of cultural autonomy. We use the phrase "cultural autonomy" to capture activities that may be understood as creative and/or artistic, and that likely relate to economic security, but also activities that do not clearly fit these categories, including choices of distribution or affiliation informed by ethos or ethics.

The relevance and prominence of the "art versus commerce" debate in popular music has varied across genre, era, and artist, but it has persisted as a sign of popular music's acceptance as "serious" art (see, for example, Bernardo and Martins; Fonarow; Hesmondhalgh; Hess; Hibbett 58-59; Keightley). According to many media and industry observers, however, such concerns are now a relic of the past, eliminated by a tangle of technological, economic, and cultural changes ushered in by the information age that have not only exacerbated commercialism within the popular music industries but sanctioned it wholesale. If the 1990s were punctuated by charges of selling out (prompted by, for example, the mainstream popularity of bands like Green Day and Nirvana), and the 2000s marked by ambivalence about commercial affiliation given the insecurity of traditional revenue streams, then the current decade is one where the relevance of values associated with selling out is questioned and disregarded. The concomitant commercialization of the internet and resulting explosion of online advertising and shopping (Curran) has produced a digital marketplace characterized by instantaneity, overwhelming abundance, and fierce competition for attention. The state of play has been expressed by musicians and journalists with the straightforward proclamation that "there's no such thing as selling out" (Berkmann; Corr; England-Nelson; Eshun; Molotkow; Ostrow). The call to question the notion of selling out resounds across a digital world that privileges commercial interactions, and where "self-branding" practices reveal how marketing techniques have become embedded in our everyday lives and identities. Against this backdrop, artists, so eager to be heard and make a living, may no longer worry about who is paying the bills, as long as they are paid (for examples, see Carah), challenging conventional understandings of selling out.

While the phrase selling out may no longer carry the same cachet, we argue that the values that underpin it still matter. Musicians are navigating these enduring values in novel ways, under transforming circumstances, faced with different choices regarding commercial affiliation than their predecessors, but not indiscriminately or without reflection. As Banks suggests, autonomous cultural work takes place within "a constantly shifting terrain of interrelationships that encompass the logics of art, commerce, the internal demands of the practice and other exterior demands of the social" (265). In this article, we consider the changes and continuities that have influenced the current shape of the popular music industries: the concurrent growth of digitalization, globalization, and promotional culture have together produced a framework for music-makers that challenges the boundaries around which selling out has been historically policed and within which artistic integrity has been traditionally understood and maintained. As opportunities to align with brands and commercial companies proliferate, and with alternatives seemingly diminishing, musicians draw and re-draw lines in order to survive: we look at how musicians make and justify various decisions, and tease out what those decisions tell us about values linked to artistic integrity. Rather than dismissing concepts like selling out and independence as antiquated or irrelevant, we argue that an exploration of selling out and its position within art versus commerce debates can help to retrieve and revive values that are integral to a healthy space for autonomous cultural production and culture more broadly. It is not our goal to prove that selling out does or does not exist or to consider whether cases do or do not meet the criteria: we aim instead to understand how perspectives on selling out have changed and what that tells us about contemporary culture.

Selling out and popular music

Music movements and scenes of the 1960s that imbued certain genres of popular music with the values and meanings of art and politics also opened the door to the policing of commercial affiliation in ways that would have seemed inappropriate to apply to "mere entertainment." The recording industry's growing interest in rock, for example, drove some of the era's artists and commentators to fret over the impact money would have on the music, musicians, and fans. Within this context, the concept of selling out began to suggest that particular values held by artists had been compromised in order to meet commercial and financial objectives. The Who, for instance, satirically entitled their third album The Who Sell Out in 1967, with photographs including each band member in mock advertisements gracing its cover.

Concern about selling out did not expire with the end of the 60s. Two decades later Neil Young recorded "This Note's For You," singing "ain't singin' for Pepsi/ ain't singin' for Coke/ I don't sing for nobody/ makes me look like a joke," though this did not stop many artists from licensing music to commercials, a practice that became more common around the turn of the 21st century (Klein; Taylor). And it is not just affiliation with commercial products that can land an artist in the selling out lurch: artists also open themselves up to critique by, for instance, crossing genre boundaries or changing music styles in ways perceived to be commercially motivated (e.g. Bob Dylan, Jefferson Airplane, Metallica, Liz Phair, Nicki Minaj); working with corporate music companies rather than smaller independents (e.g. Hüsker Dü, Nirvana, Green Day); or opening for or working with artists viewed as mainstream or corporate (e.g. Tegan and Sara touring with Katy Perry; Kendrick Lamar teaming up with Robin Thicke).

What is most striking about the activities associated with selling out—musicians advertising products, angling for mainstream success, or partnering with companies—is that they are no longer exceptional or even noteworthy. There is real evidence that perspectives on commercial affiliation and selling out have shifted: licensing a song to be used in an advertisement, once a key battleground for the debate, offers a prime example. As the practice has become more frequent and ordinary, responses changed from shocked to sanguine, critical to celebratory. The view that "In today's multimedia world, it is no longer taboo for popular recording stars to appear in TV commercials for corporate advertisers" (Hay 1) has been expressed in the music trade press and the popular press alike, and has been applied across a range of genres, including rock (Segal); pop and hip-hop (Hay); dance and electronic (Paoletta); and indie rock (Hopper; Leland). The ambivalence with which licensing by alternative or indie bands was approached at the turn of the millennium—"the revolution is over, and the advertisers have largely won" (Leland)—has no place in the assessments of recent years: "Commercial placement, or a sync, has evidenced itself as the last unimpeded pathway to our ears—what was once considered to be the lowest form of selling out, of betraying fans and compromising principles, is now regarded as a crucial cornerstone of success. And as ads have become a lifeline for bands in recent years, the stigma of doing them has all but eroded" (Hopper). (Consider how the headlines of the quoted articles underscore shifting perspectives: in 2001, "For Rock Bands, Selling Out Isn't What It Used to Be" while 2013 is defined by "How Selling Out Saved Indie Rock.") Music supervisors, once characterized in terms of what they "take" from musicians and fans, are now heralded for what they "give": exposure to new audiences, (ever decreasing) compensation, and the possibility of alternative business models for musicians.

Some of this change in attitude is related to wider shifts in the music industries and technology. Whereas just a few years ago, the belief was that "new information and communication technologies (ICTs) are liberative for artists and that structural change in the artist-intermediary relationships" would allow artists to transact with fans directly (Rogers 3), current discussion marries the inevitability of technological change with present-day economic realities to argue that musicians must team up with corporations if they want any hope of success. For example, discussing the tremendous income disparities between top-grossing and average recording artists, Huffington Post reporter Joe Satran explains how album sales have tanked, leaving musicians floundering for ways to make a living: "Today, according to industry experts, the only way to make money in the music business is to turn an artist into a brand—then do everything in your power to maximize that brand's value." Industry insiders have advised that "advertising is the new radio" (e.g. Barnhard and Rutledge; SXSW), a perspective documented by studies of the increased presence of popular and independent music in commercials (Klein; Meier, "Promotional Ubiquitous Musics"). The acceptance of this view as common wisdom suggests that there has been a major shift within the culture of music making, changing the advice musicians receive, the stories told about them, the stakeholders who influence their careers, and the frames around which their decisions are made and adjudicated.

Digitalization and the changing music industries

A central factor driving the re-evaluation of conventional boundaries regarding selling out is the economics of the music industries in the digital age. New artistic and commercial realities ushered in by digitalization have produced more opportunities for more musicians, many of whom are not signed to record deals. Greater inclusion of unsigned artists would seem to suggest the possibility of popular music that is free(er) from the commercial constraints associated with the record label system. However, this increased access has translated into an intensification of competition and corresponding reliance on a range of commercial partners. Business models centered on record sales have been displaced by newer approaches focused on revenue streams previously seen as ancillary: touring, merchandise, sponsorship, and various licensing opportunities. Although industry soothsayers have at times anticipated or assumed a link between the proliferation of new opportunities and the creation of a more even playing field across the music industries, profits continue to be monopolized by a select few. The changing realities of and corresponding discourses regarding the "new" music industries have been intertwined with the changing status of selling out: threats to established revenues streams, especially record sales, have justified increasing involvement in activities that previously would have been classified as selling out.

The growth of peer-to-peer (P2P) file sharing and, more recently, music streaming services delivered a one-two punch to the recording industry, fuelling the decline of business models that hinge on record sales. Statistics reported by recording industry lobby groups suggest steep year-on-year declines in physical music (CD, tape, DVD) sales since 1999, the year that file-sharing site Napster was launched. While in 1999 the trade value of physical recorded music had soared to $27.3 billion (see Williamson and Cloonan 15), by 2014 it had fallen to $6.8 billion, according to the International Federation of the Phonographic Industry (IFPI, “IFPI Publishes”). Though digital revenues increased to $6.9 billion in 2014, marking the first time that digital music revenues (roughly) matched physical format sales (IPFI, “Industry”), MP3 sales combined with streaming revenues have been no panacea. Rather, the displacement of brick-and-mortar record shops by iTunes and other digital retailers hastened the “unbundling” of the album and the return of the single, a shift that fed the fragmentation of recording revenues (see Marshall, “Recording Industry” 65). The increasing popularity of streaming services has intensified this dynamic of fragmentation and established a new battleground for contestations over revenue (Marsal; Sisario, “Sales”).[1]

Industry panic over the decline of recording revenues prompted the emergence of a new mindset regarding where the “real” money was to be made in the music business: touring. Williamson and Cloonan’s (16) analysis suggests that if the twentieth century was the age of the sound recording, the twenty-first century has involved the return of a robust live music business and a corresponding “shift in the balance of power between the live and recording industries.” A transition from a music industry shaped by record label gatekeeping to a live music-based model, if true, would be a remarkable reversal. Yet the characterization of the fate of the recording industry as one of collapse and of the live music industry as its successor fails to account for the decisive ways that the major record companies have—albeit after a period of considerable resistance—adapted to the changing digital music marketplace. It also does not adequately recognize the degree to which new commercial players—corporate brands—have entered the fold, as promotional strategies and business practices with origins in the promotional industries (advertising, marketing, and branding) now permeate the music industries.

The commercial realities of the increasingly post-CD marketplace have spurred a remarkable retooling and repositioning of the core music industries—recording, music publishing, and live performance—and the behemoths of the "old" industry have diversified their interests in popular music in consequential ways. The "Big Three" continue to dominate remaining album and digital track sales in what continues to be an industry marked by oligopolistic market conditions; third quarter 2014 SoundScan figures suggest that Universal Music Group, Sony Music Entertainment, and Warner Music Group had captured 38.3 percent, 27.7 percent, and 19.4 percent of this market, respectively (Christman). No longer just record companies, however, these corporate giants have repositioned themselves as music companies with business interests spanning the music industries in order to respond to changing music consumption practices (Marshall, "Recording Industry" 69). This is not simply a matter of superficial rebranding. Instead, it speaks to a more substantial organizational and industrial restructuring and to the adoption of business strategies better suited to capitalize on growing business-to-business licensing and promotional opportunities, such as the adoption of 360 deals or "multiple rights" recording contracts—a point to which we will return.

Signing a record deal is no longer a requirement for participating in the commercial music marketplace, however—a shift that has allowed for greater cultural autonomy but also produced numerous challenges for musicians. As Frith points out, "the recording studio is the place in which the relationship of art and industry is articulated, through the relationship of musicians and producers; it is the setting in which music— of all kinds—takes on commodity form" (217). Today, unsigned artists and independent recording artists benefit from the ability to self-record, self-release, and self-promote music. The availability of increasingly powerful yet relatively affordable recording technology designed for the consumer market has rendered the boundary between "professional" and "home" studios increasingly porous (Théberge 83). Whereas record contracts (past and present) often stipulate that artists deliver "commercially satisfactory" recordings (Passman 110), a process that may involve label input and involvement, unsigned musicians are now in a position to decide what might constitute an artistically and/or commercially satisfactory recording. Key decisions tied to the complex nexus of culture and commerce, art and industry, then, are routinely made outside the walls of the studio and the confines of the label. A downside of this newfound cultural autonomy is that countless signed and unsigned artists now compete for audience attention, opportunities, and income.

Just how much music is recorded and circulated on a global scale as a result of this ready access to the means of musical production has had a marked effect on the ever-changing constellation of new music businesses that have joined the juggernauts of the “old” music industries. There has never been more popular music so freely available—by way of so many music services. According to music industry analyst and blogger Mark Mulligan, with reportedly 30 million tracks available, which “would take three lifetimes to listen to … once,” listeners are faced with a “Tyranny of Choice” (Mulligan). An overwhelming array of music services are attempting to remedy this situation for listeners and would-be purchasers of digital tracks, albums, or subscriptions by aiding with music “discovery”. With over 500 music services available (Mulligan), many services have turned toward curation—via recommendation algorithms, tailored radio stations, or social features—to help listeners navigate the vast digital environment (Morris and Powers).

Although new companies continue to enter the fold, the power imbalances characteristic of the “old” music industries remain firmly intact. Research published in 2014 by MIDiA, a media and technology research and consulting firm co-founded by Mulligan, identifies a striking disparity in global music revenues generated for non-artist music industry players ($43 billion) versus superstar artists ($9.3 billion) and all remaining artists ($3.6 billion) (cited in Mulligan). While the system of major label gatekeeping had posed considerable barriers to enabling music makers to forge careers as recording artists, this new system creates space for music makers new and old to work, but the ability to generate a living wage—a decidedly different matter—remains reserved for a small minority (Meier, “Popular Music Making”). Like the recording industry, the concert business is marked by a “superstar problem,” with the top-grossing tours accounting for the overwhelming share of global profits (Schultz 733). Far from a haven for a type of musical independence freed from commercial constraints, we have seen the emergence of new forms of dependence, especially those tied to music’s new gatekeepers: Silicon Valley and Madison Avenue (see Hesmondhalgh and Meier). New monetization strategies and marketing are of paramount importance inside this widened commercial landscape and remain unequalled strengths of the major music companies.

Dominant promotional logics and popular music culture

The transformation of the music industries has taken place in the context of a widening promotional culture, a well-documented phenomenon (e.g. Aronczyk and Powers; Davis; McAllister and West) that has extended the range and style of commercially-inflected, attention-seeking communication in everyday life. Within promotional culture, “capitalist forms of exchange [have come] to dominate all other forms of exchange” and there has been an attendant explosion of “cultural phenomena whose primary function [is] to communicate a promotional message” (Aronczyk and Powers 4). These messages are frequently carried out by an arsenal of promotional professionals (publicists, advertisers, marketers, branding consultants) whose ranks have skyrocketed (Davis 18-19), though the growing numbers of these sorts of jobs cannot alone explain these changes. Even more notable is the degree to which market(ing) logic has extended its reach and normalized its presence, so that its tactics—image enhancement, reputation management, brand development, corporate partnership, and more—have turned into common practices among non-professional communicators. At the same time, “brand” has become the de facto descriptor for people, places, organizations, and ideas that previously would not have used and might even have shunned such a label: from philosophies to nations, individuals to political movements, places of worship to institutions of higher education.

The growth and extension of promotional culture and branding have paralleled and reinforced music industry trends tied to digitalization. Promotional culture is embedded in digital platforms, and particularly social media, in ways that eclipse even highly commodified media such as television and radio. As Hearn (423) has noted, the evolution of these tools has extended the need for “self-branding” within a “digital reputation economy,” where people earn value based on their capacity for being known, liked, and respected for their opinions and actions. The countless ways in which these hyper-promotional platforms have insinuated themselves into everyday communication thus can make even mundane interaction seem calculated, inorganic, and advertising-esque.

In response to this changing landscape, the popular music industries have generally become much more adroit at marketing popular music to a range of constituents through a variety of channels—an effort that has resulted, in part, from the hiring of personnel with diverse tastes and identities, especially in publicity and promotion departments. And if promotional culture and social media conspire to compel non-celebrities to craft brand identities, musicians—who are more readily understood as public figures, who produce art to be consumed by others, and who are actively involved in cultivating fans—have even greater motivation. Well- and lesser-known musicians are increasingly pressured to think about, if not actively strategize, the development of coherent, relatable brand identities that will traverse across permeable media boundaries. In practical terms, this boils down to an increasing amount of time spent building and maintaining an online presence—connecting with fans via Facebook, sharing photographs on Instagram, or posting to a blog or Bandcamp page, in order to satiate the voracious appetite of these platforms for content (Powers).

Despite the cluttered, competitive nature of the musical marketplace, popular music continues to generate meaning, value, and credibility—which, somewhat ironically, has driven promotional demands into even the most homespun corners. Such has been the fate of Austin, Texas's South by Southwest (SXSW) festival. "[H]istorically a place of artistic idiosyncrasy" and somewhere "where baby bands played their little hearts out to be discovered" (Carr), this independent music festival has transformed to welcome not just major artists, but also major brands (Pareles). The once tiny and highly localized event has become gigantic, hypermediated, and highly corporate: at the 2015 event, industry stalwarts such as Jay Z and Lady Gaga played showcases for well-known brands such as Samsung and Doritos (Carr).

As these major players continue to share, and in some cases steal, the limelight from the unknowns who still play the festival, bands trying to break in are under increased pressure to think about extending their brand across time, space, and medium. Partnerships among tech companies and bands are a new way in which both attempt to rise above the din. In 2015, for example, transit app RideScout sponsored the band Young Pandas to use the technology to travel to Austin (Chiang) and Tinder, the dating app, has become a place for band members to "hook up" with fans, both literally and figuratively (Miller).

SXSW is by no means the first time that corporations and musicians, with varying degrees of capital and stature, have forged these kinds of connections. Sponsorship has taken many different forms over the course of popular music's history, from sponsorship of tours and venues to more carefully curated deals involving artists using and promoting particular products or services, or licensing their image to music and non-music products alike. What the SXSW example brings into stark relief is the degree to which promotionalism now permeates even those spaces that were previously immune, as well as how early in an artist's career such logics are adopted.

As a result of the above changes and challenges, musicians have been compelled to take part in an increasing number and variety of promotional opportunities, which is happening within a wider environment where branding and marketing are normalized inside and outside the new music industries.

Artists as global brands

Today's major music companies see their recording artists' "brand" as the core asset to be leveraged across music formats, platforms, and venues. While the "old" recording industry's business model was based on funding, owning, and distributing sound recordings, as well as exploiting intellectual property rights, the latter has grown in importance, enabling the back catalog-rich majors to forge various licensing agreements with streaming services, media companies, and other brand partners (Marshall, "Recording Industry" 63). Changes to and enforcement of copyright law continue to largely benefit the most powerful, including superstar artists and major media companies (Klein, Moss, and Edwards). The institutionalization of 360 deals has formalized and cemented record companies' ability to capitalize on and grow non-recording revenues tied to popular music and artist personae, thereby supplementing waning profits from the sale of albums, singles, and MP3s (see Marshall "360 Deal"; Stahl and Meier). Under these agreements, selling music becomes just one part of a musician's enterprise, which now includes licensing, endorsement, and merchandising in addition to touring. In this milieu, record labels have begun to self-describe as "artist-focused global rights management" companies (Marshall, "360 Deal" 83); hybrid record label/branding agencies have emerged (such as New York-based MBM Music or LA's Atom Factory); advertisers have begun to sidestep labels to access unsigned artists directly (DuBois); and "artist brand management" companies have cropped up to specialize in building alliances aimed at enhancing both product and artist brand identities (High).

Understanding the central aspect of a music maker as his or her "brand" does much to normalize and legitimate a wider business and promotional environment where musicians court or are courted by corporate brands and sponsors, and therefore regularly interact with and rely upon non-music related products, services, and corporations. In the press and among industry experts, these alliances are usually framed as savvy business “partnerships”—mutually beneficial arrangements that empower both players. Certainly, musicians, no matter their level of fame (Carah 69), can benefit from arrangements with brand sponsors, which may provide access and visibility that have become increasingly difficult to procure via other means. However, what becomes clear as these deals proliferate is that they also have transferred power within the music industries to other corporations, and while artists may have gained more choices, they have gained little in terms of power.

Significantly, the changes discussed above have taken hold not just in the United States and United Kingdom but instead are global in scope. The twenty-first century has seen intensified industry-wide consolidation and concentration, with Universal, Sony, and Warner now at the helm across the global music marketplace.[2] Whereas until the 1980s the record industry was “relatively territorial,” international consolidation has set “increasingly global/international priorities for majors operating in national territories, and raises the cost of entry into markets for independent companies” (Rogers 131). Moreover, many of the corporate brands that routinely partner with recording artists are global brands (e.g. Coca-Cola, McDonald’s, Budweiser), as are key branding and advertising consultancies involved in forging such agreements (e.g. Leo Burnett Worldwide, Grey Group, DDB Worldwide).

In an age of both globalization and digitalization, cultural products circulate widely and often instantaneously across borders. While licensing and promotional agreements between music makers and corporate partners routinely are territory-specific, musicians today may choose to license their music outside their home nation, potentially reaching international audiences and markets. By partnering with powerful brands, however, music makers may exercise less control over their image, reputation, and their own “brand.”

Against an aura of openness and free(er) global exchange, two counterpoints are worth bearing in mind. First, differing intellectual property and censorship laws mean that the global flow of popular music is far from seamless. As Jung and Li note, “the online sphere is still a hierarchical world” replete with “dynamic interactions among the uneven and unequal agents and agencies” that circulate popular music (2805). Second, despite the distributed and DIY promises of the early web, as digital media companies that trade in music expand globally (e.g. YouTube, Google, Facebook, Twitter, Spotify, and Deezer), they by and large have decided to be allies rather than adversaries of the major music companies (Rogers 71, 86-87). For example, YouTube began entering into agreements with record labels to legally host their content as early as 2006; over the years, lucrative ad revenue sharing programs and music hosting services such as Vevo have emerged, and YouTube has been monetized in over 50 countries (IFPI, "Industry"; Rogers 86). The increased integration of global music markets also impairs independence in other ways.

Many of the social media platforms used by musicians benefit from monopolistic market conditions and tend to be dominated by major label artists, making it difficult for smaller acts to break in (Rogers 141). For example, Katy Perry, whose blockbuster 2013 album Prism was a hit in 100 countries, is the "most followed personality in the world of Twitter" (IFPI, IFPI Digital Music 31). While there are certainly exceptions, streaming charts such as Official Audio Streaming Chart, Billboard's Streaming Songs, and Spotify Charts also are typically topped by the same cohort of stars who sit atop the pop charts in general. These are the same artists who also dominate the global touring market—a fact that is aided by global consolidation in ticketing, festival organization, booking, and promotion, especially in the growth of Live Nation (Huijgh and Evens 92).

In sum, digitalization has helped enable and hasten globalization in terms of faster (often instantaneous) distribution, promotion, and monetization. Today, as always, celebrity status is key to power, influence, and commercial success in the music industries. What is distinctive is that the major music companies have been joined by corporate brands in the production of stardom. As many music makers have embraced as allies business partners that would have appeared antithetical to their ideals a generation ago—brands, advertisers, and other media businesses—perceptions of what constitutes selling out and why have undergone serious re-evaluation and for good reason.

The industrial, commercial, and promotional dynamics we have explored highlight a complicated, paradoxical universe of music-making and moneymaking. How have artists navigated these complexities? Some artists deliberately eschew certain forms of promotionalism (such as social media or having their music on streaming services) only to embrace others (e.g. licensing to a commercial or going on a brand-sponsored tour). Others judiciously contemplate their options and make careful choices about their associations while still others take all the promotional opportunities that come their way. Whatever their approach, artists cannot ignore the promotional universe that surrounds them and exhorts them to participate.

The nuances of selling out

Given the environment described above, it may be expected that the delicate line between art and commerce has been crossed so completely as to cease to exist, and that the discourse around selling out and cultural autonomy no longer has a place in a world where business and promotion blend apparently harmoniously with music making and listening. But the shifting rhetoric we identify above—from the characterization of technology corporations as cutting out the middleman between musicians and fans to the acceptance of corporate collaboration as unavoidable—hints at the tension lurking behind contemporary alliances. Instead of a mutually beneficial promotional free-for-all, we see a necessary halfway house between staunch independence and unabashed selling out for many artists: evidence that digitalization, promotionalism, and globalization have acutely influenced the shape of the music and marketing industries but also that the values at the heart of selling out claims endure in less stark but no less meaningful terms. There continue to be many examples of artists compromising in one area in order to maintain independence in another, reflecting the “socially embedded, compromised or ‘negotiated’ autonomy” that Banks argues “is now more prevalent amongst cultural workers engaged in routine production” (252). This section explores some of the ways in which compromise has been expressed and justified.

Maintaining cultural autonomy remains central to the decision-making processes of many musicians, though the path to autonomy is a varied one and choices that may, on the surface, appear counterintuitive sit alongside more traditional approaches. For the few musicians to have the option, one of those choices is whether to sign to a major label or not. There have been moments in the history of popular music, coalescing particularly around punk and indie scenes of the 80s and 90s, when the ideology around selling out was primarily associated with signing to major record labels. In the contemporary music marketplace, divisions between major and independent companies have been eroded by, for example, distribution and publishing deals, and ways in which major labels have responded to challenges over revenue streams. The decision to switch from an independent label to a major one is justified not on the basis that the old division was meaningless, but that it no longer exists.

For example, on leaving independent label 4AD for a major, musician St. Vincent asserted, "I think the music industry is the wild, wild west now and the labels of 'indie' and 'major' don't mean the same things that they did 20 years ago. If people think that they still do mean those things then they're working off an old paradigm" (Ugwu). Trent Reznor of Nine Inch Nails, who signed to Columbia (Sony) in 2013 after parting ways with Interscope (Universal) and going independent in 2007, goes further still, suggesting that the downsizing experienced by the major recording companies has forced out all but the most competent staff: "If there used to be 100 people at a major working on a record now there are 18, but they're the good ones" ("Trent Reznor on Nine Inch Nails"). Even Prince, who bemoaned his "slave" status under the control of a major label recording contract, has returned to Warner Bros, noting in a statement, "A brand-new studio album is on the way and both Warner Bros Records and Eye (sic) are quite pleased with the results of the negotiations and look forward to a fruitful working relationship" ("Prince Re-Signs").

Rather than demonstrating that independence as a value no longer matters, these examples suggest that the choice to sign to a major label hinges on the ability to prove that major labels can fit comfortably with values associated with independence. So we hear assertions that the differences between major and indie no longer exist; that major labels are better now than they used to be; or that (at least certain) artists have more power to negotiate. Taken together, the justifications suggest that the threat once posed by major labels to the integrity of the music has been nullified. (In the UK, the term "indie" is applied to a particular sound regardless of label affiliation: its detachment from roots in independent music production is another indication that the integrity of the sound is not necessarily linked to the independence of its production context.)

The reasons offered by artists for signing to a major label are not new: in 1986, for example, Hüsker Dü defended leaving DIY linchpin SST for Warner Bros on the basis of retaining creative control and in order to reach a wider audience. While Hüsker Dü biographer Andrew Earles argues that at the time of Hüsker Dü's signing "the 'sellout' issue carried little weight" (185), only later gaining steam following the success of Nirvana's Nevermind, the line of demarcation is not so clear. Firstly, although there is no doubt that the presence and power of selling out discourse has waxed and waned, Hüsker Dü's signing was a big deal within admittedly small circles (e.g. readers of punk zine Maximumrocknroll) and the band was pushed to defend their choice, whereas today bands typically do not face the same fan pressures or criticisms. Secondly, bands at “the top of their game” often find themselves in a different position vis-a-vis what labels can and will offer: the combination of greater leverage and a clearer sense of artistic vision means that they are both better placed to be offered a fair contract from a major label or to gain the most from staying with an independent label.

Other artists have turned down major label contracts for a range of reasons: the perception that they do not need what a major label can offer; that independence offers more control over artistic and other choices; on principle. Cases of bands returning to independent labels following a stint with a major (Raber) support the belief that independent labels can offer advantages in some circumstances. Indeed, even some top stars, like Taylor Swift, are signed to independent labels (though such labels routinely work with majors for distribution). Such perspectives are not limited to the punk and indie genres for which they are best known: rappers like Chance the Rapper and Dom Kennedy have credited their success with staying independent. Chance the Rapper saw “no reason” to sign to a major label: “It’s a dead industry” (Hyman). And Kennedy explained, “The type of deal I was looking for just wasn’t available. The business structure we wanted and the control; that’s what it really came down to” (Robehmed).

While musicians have production options that allow for the avoidance of major labels (or, in some cases, labels altogether), it is also the case that many other big (non-music) corporations are becoming increasingly difficult to avoid if a musician is to distribute and promote his or her music through the increasingly standard online and offline channels. As mentioned earlier, a now standard example of this is licensing to commercials. Once a rare option for artists (and a difficult decision for some of the chosen few), it has become a key vehicle through which musicians can maintain forms of independence in one realm by aligning with a corporation in another. Artists have used music licensing opportunities in order to afford self-releases or to supplement the often minimal income achieved through independent releases. But the choice is not so simple as blindly running into the arms of non-music corporations: the musicians interviewed by Klein considered a range of variables, including the type of product, ethics of the company, and aesthetics of the spot, suggesting it is not a case of putting values aside, but negotiating the same values applied to music-making in a different context. The jokes sometimes cracked about criteria used to evaluate opportunities reveal the subtlety of the distinctions: Gruff Rhys of the Super Furry Animals teased that the group, who had turned down various licensing offers, would modify their position for Red Stripe beer: “We live in hope that a great product will, one day, rescue us from the clubs” (Klein 131).

Another area in which non-music corporations have become integral to music production and distribution processes relates to the increasingly central role of the web and social media for musicians. While the corporations behind such platforms now dwarf the companies of a previous era that they seek to replace and, as we noted, often have ties with the record labels anyway, they can be viewed as offering more control to musicians and a fairer return even as the actual value to musicians has been challenged (see, for example, Byrne). (Dicola suggests it’s too early to tell.) Thomson explores the growing number of roles and revenue streams managed by musicians, including those enabled by digital technology like YouTube. She writes, “Digital music stores, streaming services, and webcasting stations have greatly reduced the cost barriers to the distribution and sale of music, giving musicians the ability to promote and sell their own music—globally—without having to sign away their copyrights” (515). And yet these technologies, as Thomson goes on to explain, bring responsibilities as well as opportunities, not least in terms of the activities associated with brand-building. Musician Amanda Palmer has been applauded for her use of crowdfunding website Kickstarter to release her 2012 solo album, but her success masks the cost of the extensive social media and promotion necessary to achieve the goal (not to mention the unrealistic nature of this model for most musicians) (Lindvall; Powers). The examples make clear, however, the way in which technology corporations are largely viewed as qualitatively different in terms of evaluations of control and integrity than the music corporations they enable musicians to bypass. Yet the emergence of bands who choose relatively unsearchable names (e.g. Merchandise) or who choose to keep their identities and personalities separate from their artistic output (e.g. Jungle) suggests that, for some, online promotional expectations are eschewed.

Even when musicians choose to distance themselves from both music and technology corporations, it is often the case that fans do the work of promotion through the same or similar platforms, ensuring their role as a now necessary conduit. The affective labor of fans can in this way provide a layer of distance between musicians and corporations. Baym and Burnett document the role of fan support and labor in the Swedish independent music scene, noting that “this kind of voluntary fan effort can be seen throughout the music industry, and speaks to the fundamental changes that global industry is experiencing as the music business increasingly shifts to digital formats" (434). In their study, musician Gustaf Kjellvander of the Fine Arts Showcase elaborates, "I believe the 'indie' (it's a kind of watered down term) point is that promotion is word of mouth vs. big bucks being thrown at it—one suit backing it with his bread" (437). In some ways, emphasis on smaller-scale participation in promotional activities rather than opting out altogether marks a continuity with the stance adopted by many independent musicians under the old music industry model. After all, as Keightley points out, indie rock has long been "defined by its concern for the scale of consumer capitalism, rather than by its radical rejection of an economic system" (129). The use of corporate-owned (and "big bucks"-driven) online platforms is a far cry from the fanzines and college radio shows that once served this purpose, but explanations of and justifications for choices reveal the persistence of core values related to autonomy and independence, even if decisions are effectively made from the "wrong" side of the art-commerce boundary (i.e. ranking involvement of one corporation or company over another).

Conclusions

Ultimately, most musicians want their music to be heard. Activities at which artists may have once looked askance have become increasingly more attractive as strategies to break through the clutter of a million messages and nearly as many bands in order to reach a potential audience. In this respect, corporations have been positioned as a support to popular music cultures, helping artists to reach wider audiences (Carah). The supportive boost of promotion can be provided through a contract with a music corporation, the use of platforms provided by technology corporations, or the exposure through licensing to a consumer goods corporation. Though in all cases the support is conditional on corporations reaping rewards – this is investment, not patronage. NME summed up Trent Reznor's stance: "losing a level of control to a label is worth the increased exposure an international company can provide a band" (Bychawski). For those without major label support (by choice or circumstance), other opportunities to reach potential audiences cannot be rejected out of hand.

Given the shifts in technology and in the wider promotional environment, it could be argued that there is simply no space for selling out. And yet the values and ideologies that have formed the structure of cultural autonomy and, crucially, artistic integrity persist: it is not the case that artists do not care but the evidence of caring is more nuanced, sometimes contradictory. There is no single act—signing to a major label, licensing to a commercial, entering into a business partnership, relying on advertising-supported platforms—that proves integrity has been compromised. Instead, there are countless considerations, decisions, and justifications that demonstrate the extent to which integrity is maintained and remains at the heart of music making.

The assertion that selling out has changed while core values relevant to cultural autonomy persist suggests competing pessimistic and optimistic interpretations: either the range of choices available to musicians will decrease until we awake to Adorno's worst nightmare or values of integrity will survive any capitalist stranglehold on culture. A key issue is whether such values can be mobilized in order to better protect and support autonomous cultural production. Continuing to map and explore change in this area is critical not just to our understanding of the role of popular music in society but also the role of commerce in a vast number of arenas shaped by the interlinked forces of digitalization, promotionalism, and globalization.

Notes

1. Overall, the growth of advertising-supported streaming companies has been a boon rather than a threat to major labels—as opposed to music makers and smaller labels—who as owners of copyrights have been able to strike lucrative, nation-specific, and often lopsided deals, and capitalize on massive catalogues of music (Morris and Powers; Rogers 89).

2. The "Big Six" record companies (Capitol/EMI, CBS, MCA, Polygram, RCA, and Warner) had fallen into the hands of just four companies (Universal, EMI, Warner, and Sony) by 2004 (Burkart and McCourt). The "Big Four" was then reduced to the "Big Three" with Universal's purchase of EMI in 2011 (Sisario, "U.S.").

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